



The Trump Administration's Hezbollah Problem

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As paramilitary organizations go, Lebanon's Hezbollah has achieved resounding success since its establishment by the revolutionary Iranian regime, which was newly constituted in the early 1980s. Now, the Party of God approaches becoming a legal and constitutional arm of the Lebanese state, but with the independence enjoyed by its founding prototype, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Politically, the party has already achieved a coveted status in the state—it has 12 members in the Chamber of Deputies, two ministers in the government of Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, and presidencies of and memberships in many municipalities.

In a recent television interview, Lebanese President Michel Aoun bestowed on Hezbollah an ill-advised acknowledgement from the highest constitutional office in the country by [declaring](#) that the Shiite-based organization is an essential partner of the Lebanese army in the defense of the nation. This announcement was also a continuation of Aoun's cozying up to Hezbollah with which he, as leader of the Christian-based Free Patriotic Movement in the parliament, had a political understanding until his election as president last October. But Hezbollah's status will only become official if and after the Lebanese Parliament votes to approve it, making the upcoming June parliamentary elections crucial.

If parliament approves the measure, it will create a serious problem in Lebanon's domestic politics and in dealing with its Arab environment. Moreover, it will require, and indeed get, increased attention from the United States as the Trump Administration sharpens its rhetoric against the Islamic Republic of Iran. With Hezbollah possibly dictating Lebanon's internal and external policies after it fully ends its involvement in the Syrian civil war, this attention could range from curtailing military assistance to the Lebanese army to sanctioning Lebanon's economy. What, however, is most feared is a rash decision to confront Hezbollah militarily, with Israel's assistance, which will once again destroy whatever progress the country has made in addressing the physical damage it suffered from decades of civil war, occupation, and Israel-Hezbollah wars.

Hezbollah's Status in Lebanon

The Trump Administration will find that Hezbollah has already secured a powerful position within the Lebanese state, with some undesirable repercussions. Since 2012, Hezbollah has staked its stature and military strength on its fortunes in the Syrian civil war. It has also made a large segment of the Lebanese Shiite community hostage to a political and strategic stance that both ignored the Lebanese government's position on the war and contradicted the wishes of other communities, thus complicating the Shia's status in Lebanese society in the process. The different cabinets serving during former President Michel Suleiman's term (2008-2014) followed a "[policy of](#)

[dissociation](#)” from the Syrian war in the hope that Lebanon can avoid its negative fallout. However, while Suleiman succeeded in keeping official Lebanon out of the war, Hezbollah’s active participation in it made the country a party to its carnage and in fact exposed the state’s inability to impose its writ on one of its own political forces.

Today, Hezbollah would like to use its Syrian adventure in its tug-of-war with other Lebanese political forces that have always resented its extra-legal existence and its involvement in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Asad. But if it were able to force its adversaries and institutionalists in the army and some security organizations to accept it as a legal arm of the state—akin to the IRGC and the Iraqi [Popular Mobilization Forces](#)—it would then have succeeded beyond its wildest dreams. However, that possibility would not necessarily be the end-all state since, given the mutual fear built into the Lebanese confessional political system, the party is likely one day to face another sectarian militia that could clandestinely spring up to challenge its position and influence.

As it is today, Hezbollah does not represent the entire Shiite community in the country. Its rival among the Shia is the AMAL Movement, headed by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, who—although currently allied with the party—represents a slightly different Shiite elite grouping that has good relations with the Sunni Arab hinterland, especially the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, Hezbollah has in a way created its own backlash among the Shia when it committed large numbers of its fighters to Syria and [paid a price](#) of close to 2,000 dead and 6,000 wounded. In fact, while many supported the party as a movement for Shiite ascendance and resistance against Israel, some remained critical of committing their sons to support authoritarian rule against the Syrian people.

What Hezbollah is facing today is the necessity of securing parliamentary approval of its legal status. Lebanon is preparing for parliamentary elections in June 2017 to replace the current Chamber of Deputies that was elected in 2009 and has twice renewed its tenure in 2013 and 2014. The main obstacle has been a new electoral law. Hezbollah and its allies prefer a proportional representation law that can enhance the Shia’s plurality in the country. Other forces want a law based on multiple-constituency districts which apportion seats according to sectarian divisions. And a third group tries to combine elements of both. The central concern is ensuring a simple majority of 65 deputies out of a total of 128, a threshold that, if attained, would most assuredly allow Hezbollah to propose an amendment to the constitution acknowledging its legal status in the state alongside the regular army.

Hezbollah-Iran-Syria Calculations

Now that the Syrian war is moving on a course charted more according to Russian understandings than determined by American influence, a few non-Lebanese issues will impact how the Trump Administration may look at Hezbollah and Iran.

First, the last few months after the Syrian regime’s re-conquest of eastern Aleppo exposed some serious rifts between Russia and Iran and Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy. Despite its military campaign

to save the Bashar al-Asad regime, Russia would like to be [seen](#) as trying to find an equitable solution that accommodates everyone's wishes while keeping it atop the political process in Syria. Yet there are [reports](#) that Iran and Hezbollah are trying to steer developments they can influence in a direction that may thwart that Russian wish, such as by violating ceasefire agreements and exploiting opposition weaknesses in areas important to them. At the same time, Turkey [insisted](#) at the beginning of the Astana, Kazakhstan, talks that Hezbollah as a foreign force should withdraw from Syria, a move that would arguably limit Iran's and the party's influence on the final outcome of the war.

However, whatever blood and treasure Iran and its Hezbollah, Iraqi, and South Asian militia allies have shed and expended on the Syrian battlefield, what appears decisive there may only be Russia's strategic quest for a base in Syria—and not the Islamic Republic's desire for a docile regime in Damascus. Although the Kremlin is not loath to safeguarding Iranian interests in Syria, no one can be sure that Iran will be allowed a dominant role there. Additionally, if Russia is keen to develop positive relations with Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council, it may find a way not to allow Iran to accomplish fully what it desires after Syria's war ends.

Second, from their side, and whatever their Syrian fortunes are, what Hezbollah and Iran would like to ensure is an acceptable and assured military position along the Lebanese-Syrian border, specifically the strategic crossing points astride the party's bases in Lebanon's east and northeast. These areas have geographic contiguity with the western districts of Damascus and the Damascus-Homs littoral, which also connects the Syrian capital with the Alawite areas in western Syria. If Russia is indeed going to limit the Iran-Hezbollah slice of the Syrian pie, Iran would want to secure at least some say in the halls of power in Damascus while Hezbollah would work to preserve its strategic depth on either side of the border. Both possibilities would serve Iran's strategic interest in having a corridor connecting it with the eastern Mediterranean and Hezbollah's ability to acquire weapons and missiles clandestinely from the Islamic Republic.

Third, Hezbollah's full withdrawal from Syria would undoubtedly reawaken Israel's worry about the party's presence on its northern border. While United Nations Security Council [Resolution 1701](#) of August 2006 set the conditions for an Israeli-Hezbollah ceasefire, it was Hezbollah's energetic involvement in the Syrian war that kept the Israeli-Lebanese border almost completely conflict free. There obviously was the occasional military operation that raised tensions between the two parties—such as Israel's military action against Hezbollah in the [occupied Golan Heights](#) and the recent [air strikes](#) against weapons shipments through Syria—but nothing jeopardized the de facto peace between them. In fact, Hezbollah detractors in Lebanon still use its support of Bashar al-Asad to criticize the party for abandoning its claim of being a pivotal actor in the ["axis of resistance"](#) to Israel and imperialist powers.

Potential Trump Administration Responses

Lebanon has for decades been an American friend and strategic partner in the Middle East. Previous administrations have separated American policy toward the country from Hezbollah—which is considered a terrorist organization—and its challenges and policies and instead have focused on targeting the party and its organs and personnel. Going forward, and given the strident anti-Iran rhetoric coming from the White House, the Trump Administration may see that the time has come to change course.

One area that the administration may address is the long-standing relationship with the Lebanese armed forces. Lebanon has [received](#) \$1 billion worth of weapons and training from the United States since 2006, \$220 million of which in [2016](#) alone. Assistance has included armored personnel carriers, artillery, transport vehicles, helicopters, and training. The main intent of the military aid has been to help the country in its confrontation with terrorist infiltration across the border from Syria. This relationship, however, has come under severe strain after revelations that Hezbollah may have confiscated American personnel carriers and weapons given to the Lebanese army and used them in a military parade in the vicinity of the city of Homs in [November 2016](#). Denials by the Lebanese government and the Obama Administration did not necessarily convince Israel and may not now be sufficient to dissuade the Trump Administration from believing that Hezbollah indeed took the weapons. Consequently, it is likely that the administration will at least suspend any military aid going to Lebanon.

This course of action would indeed be counterproductive, just as was the case with the Saudi Arabian [suspension](#) of \$3 billion to the Lebanese army in February of 2016. Such moves only exacerbate the challenge felt by Lebanese political forces opposed to Hezbollah, who are working toward an open democratic future for Lebanon and anxious to keep it part of the Arab world. These forces' stance was [obvious](#) vis-à-vis President Aoun's announcement about the legitimacy of Hezbollah's weapons and military role. Not only are they concerned about the negative repercussions of the party's potentially dominant legal role but also about the effect this would have on Lebanon's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council, which has [declared](#) Hezbollah a terrorist organization and sees it as a front for Iran's overreach. In other words, an American boycott of the Lebanese armed forces, coupled with a continuing suspension of Saudi Arabian assistance, may very well leave the Lebanese government subject to endless Iranian interference.

Another potential response to Hezbollah's role in Lebanon could be a series of American or international economic sanctions, which could be imposed on Lebanese financial markets. But this measure would hurt the overall economy and may derail the successes that Lebanese banks have enjoyed for a long time. Over the years, Lebanon has been vigilant about avoiding such sanctions and has [complied](#) with all American Treasury Department requirements regarding Hezbollah's access to financial institutions, prompting complaints and criticism from the party.

The Trump Administration could also retaliate by targeting Lebanon's exploitation of newly discovered hydrocarbon reserves on the Mediterranean coast, [estimated](#) at 865 million barrels of

oil and 96 trillion cubic feet of natural gas that, if properly handled, could net the country \$600 billion. As it is now, Lebanon seems to be far behind other neighboring countries that share the general largess in the eastern Mediterranean. Indeed, Lebanon, Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, and Syria—when it ends its civil war—will soon become new hubs for oil and gas exports that could easily become strategic assets; they could also serve as the answer to Europe’s coveted independence from Russian exports.

Finally, dealing with Hezbollah may very well be an element of the Trump Administration’s overall approach to addressing the nagging Iranian question. To be sure, the administration has sent signals that Iran is [on notice](#), and that should not be construed to be limited to its behavior in Syria, in the waters of the Arabian Gulf, or regarding missile technology. In all scenarios, however, it is preferable that the administration continue to follow established American policies to separate Lebanon the country and government from Hezbollah’s actions and challenges so that the country’s fragile democracy can be saved. On the other hand, if the Party of God succeeds in becoming a legal and constitutional arm of the state, neither Lebanon’s history as a strategic partner for the United States nor its western orientation may help it avoid a rash and ill-advised decision by Trump’s White House.